
John Boghosian Arden. *America's Meltdown, The Lowest-Common Denominator Society*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

Reviewed by Donald K. Pickens

For years American intellectuals and critics have judged American life and institutions. In many cases they have found the United States' condition as dismal. From many points of view and invoking many ideologies, they repeat in secular terms the jeremiads that their puritan forefathers used. In brief, America is not living up to her destiny for the world's benefit or for her national self-interest. Usually every thing is wrong or out of place or misused. The audience for such sermons/books is not limited to an academic crowd.

Arden, Director of Training in the Department of Psychiatry at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, Vallejo, California, offers us *America's Meltdown*. The message is not new. Every institution is in bad shape. Bad taste and ethical laziness of the popular culture invades the American social psyche. Simplistic and avoidance thinking impacts everything, from the presidency to the man in the street who thinks he has choices in the culture. With the market driven by TV, he is a mere pawn. After all, "reality" TV is not reality but a means to sell stuff while watching people in very uncomfortable situations and positions.

With statistics drawn from popular literature, and works on popular culture, the book offers little insight into the American malaise if indeed there is one. Arden assumes that status and argues for the thesis. Personally I do not defend the stuff and nonsense that come from the White House or Madison Avenue, which is often the same message. No doubt bad taste and cheap goods are present in American life. Arden can prove it historically but the narrative

begins about 1970. The market does determine much of American life and intellectuals despair about it. But as Jerry Z. Muller in *The Mind and the Market, Capitalism in Modern European Thought* (2003) demonstrates, it is a sentiment of long standing.

Arden attempts too much. The analysis is a “mile wide and an inch deep.” His concern is genuine and his outrage is admirable. It is just too unfocused.

The ideology is historically borrowed from an aristocratic perspective that assumes things associated with business and commerce are definitely below acceptability. Popular culture and democracy are not the same thing. The American public does respond to the better angels of their nature on occasion but the crisis has to be real. Most time people just remark that’s politics or TV or some one trying to make money and go on about their affairs.

On a more positive note, Arden has produced a handy source for varied shortcomings of American life and his quotes from various literary and political figures are delightful. His examples of meltdown are amusing and insightful to a point. Robert Bork has already written the book from a shriller point of view. Arden is easier to read.

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